

Rev. Ezekiel Gilbert Gear, D.D., chaplain at Fort Snelling, 1838-1858 /

E. G. Gear.

REV. EZEKIEL GILBERT GEAR, D. D., CHAPLAIN AT FORT SNELLING, 1838–1858.

An Address on the occasion of the Presentation of his Portrait to the Minnesota Historical Society, at the monthly meeting of its Executive Council, February 12th, 1906, by the Rt. Rev. Samuel Cook Edsall, D. D., Bishop of Minnesota .

The pleasant duty of rendering honor tonight to Father Gear, of blessed memory, and of formally presenting to the Historical Society the excellent portrait in oil painted by Miss Grace E. McKinstry, of Faribault, comes to me simply because in the Providence of God I am now Bishop of the Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Minnesota, and can therefore represent more fully than anyone else the religious body of which Father Gear was the pioneer minister, and which now rejoices in the opportunity of placing his likeness in your custody, where it may be preserved among the portraits of the other great men who bore their part in laying the foundations of this commonwealth.

This duty could have been more adequately performed either by Rev. William C. Pope, of St. Paul, or Rev. George C. Tanner, D. D., of Faribault, the residence and ministry of both of whom go back to a point in Minnesota's history which would enable them to speak from personal knowledge, not only of the later years of Father Gear's own life, but of the other men with whom he labored, and of events in which they themselves have borne an honorable part.

To Mr. Pope we owe the inception of the project for procuring this portrait, and most of the credit for carrying it through to completion; while to Dr. Tanner, as the historian of

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the Episcopal 692 Church in this Diocese, we are indebted for the gathering of the facts which have made Father Gear's life and labors familiar to those of us who belong to a later generation.

But enlightened by what Mr. Pope and Dr. Tanner have contributed to the early history of the Episcopal Church in Minnesota, I have been permitted to realize how remarkable was the man in whose honor we have met tonight, and how prominent was his share in doing the very first work, not only of the Episcopal Church, but of any English-speaking religious body, among the white settlers of Minnesota, and particularly in that portion of Minnesota centering about Fort Snelling and the junction of the Mississippi and Minnesota rivers, embracing the present great cities of St. Paul and Minneapolis.

The salient fact for us to fasten in our minds, in estimating the place of this man among Minnesota's pioneers, is that he began his labors as chaplain at Fort Snelling, and as a Christian missionary in the vicinity, in April, 1839, and that thus he became (aside from the Rev. Clement F. Jones, post chaplain in 1828, and aside from certain faithful missionaries among the Indians and half-breeds) the first resident Christian minister of Minnesota. In the days of Mr. Jones' chaplaincy, and, in fact, up to the time of Father Gear's coming, there was practically no white settlement in which a resident minister could labor. We would not detract from the heroism of any missionary who gave his life to ministering among the Indians, nor from the fidelity of any chaplain who may have held service for the garrison in the fort; nor do we deny that it is possible that some occasional service may have been held somewhere in the present boundaries of Minnesota for some passing party of traders or explorers; but the fact remains that Ezekiel G. Gear was the first Christian minister, permanently residing in Minnesota, to conduct services regularly in the English language among the white settlers of the future state. That this fact should be stated and known is but due to a man whose missionary zeal was such that he did not content himself with his Sunday morning and evening services in the fort, but was keen to avail himself of the earliest opportunity of gathering the settlers at 693 points like the

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future Mendota and St. Paul for public worship, and of entering into relations with them as a Christian pastor.

To be the first Christian minister to officiate regularly in the English language among the white settlers of Minnesota is proud enough title for any man. But when we add to this that in personal character, in missionary zeal, in intellectual ability, in farseeing plans, as well as in commanding physical presence, he was a man of altogether exceptional force and power, and one whose influence as a force for righteousness counted more than that of any other one man in those earliest days of Minnesota's history, we can see that it would have constituted a neglect almost criminal if we had failed to preserve his features, with some record of his life, here in this hall of Minnesota's fame, and in this shrine where her early records are cherished.

Ezekiel Gilbert Gear was born in Middletown, Connecticut, September 13th, 1793. He was ordained deacon by Bishop Griswold in the same church in which he was baptized, and his diaconate was passed in that diocese. He was ordained priest by Bishop Hobart, and was appointed missionary in the western part of New York state. There he labored at Onondaga Hill, Avon, Manlius, Ithaca, Syracuse, Binghamton and Brownsville. He also worked among the Oneida and Onondaga Indians, baptizing, marrying, and admitting many to the communion of the Church. He was present at the confirmation by Bishop Hobart of ninety-seven Indians, presented by Eleazar Williams. We can well imagine that this previous connection with Indian work led him to take an especial interest in advocating, as he did, the beginning of work among the Sioux and Ojibways of Minnesota.

In 1836 Mr. Gear was appointed by the Board of Missions as missionary at Galena, Illinois, where he built a church. He also did missionary duty in southern and western Wisconsin, and in northwestern Illinois, visiting Dubuque, Mineral Point and Prairie du Chien. He accompanied Bishop Kemper on one of his visitations to Green Bay, probably in 1838, when the corner-stone of Hobart Church on the Oneida Reservation was laid.

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On October 2d, 1838, he was appointed post chaplain at Fort Snelling. In writing to the Board of Missions with regard to the chaplaincy, he said: "A considerable settlement has already commenced 694 in the vicinity of the fort, and it is the understanding that I am to be at liberty to extend my labors among them. Without drawing any support from the Committee, I beg that they will consider me as under their direction, and allow me to still make reports to them as heretofore." The considerable settlement to which he refers was Mendota, or, as it was then called, St. Peter, which was also the name of the river. A few months earlier, on June 12th, 1838, the northern part of the Louisiana Purchase, including what later became southern and western Minnesota, had been nominally organized as Iowa Territory. Accordingly we find that the Board of Missions passed a resolution, "That the Rev. E. G. Gear be appointed missionary in the Precinct of St. Peter, Iowa, and that the Committee accede to his kind proposal to act without salary."

It was already late in the season when Mr. Gear set out from Galena for his remote home, traveling first to Fort Crawford at Prairie du Chien. From this point the journey was to be made by sledges on the ice of the Mississippi river. He had engaged a Canadian to transport him and his goods on a one-horse sledge, of the kind then in use, but when seated on the top of his baggage the sledge gave a lurch which threw him on the ice. When Mr. Sibley and Mr. Dousman picked him up, it was found that his hip bone was broken. He was obliged to remain in the hospital at Fort Crawford all winter, and was lamed for life. Thereafter he was compelled to preach in a sitting posture. But we are told that such was his presence and voice that this did not detract from the force of his sermons.

Not only were Mr. Gear's ministrations at Fort Snelling faithful and efficient, but we find him conducting a school at the fort, and winning by his ministrations the interest of such men as General Sibley. Moreover, we find him pleading the necessity of work among the Indians, and bringing the attention of the Board to Ennigahbowh. In 1843 Bishop Kemper paid his first visit to Minnesota as the guest of Father Gear at Fort Snelling.

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The daughters of Father Gear state that he told them that he held his first service in the settlement at St. Paul in 1840. Mr. A. L. Larpenteur states that he well remembers when Mr. Gear 695 and Father Ravoux, the revered Roman Catholic pastor who labored here more than half a century, were accustomed to alternate in holding Sunday services in St. Paul. There would seem to be no question but that Father Gear held the first service in the English language within the present limits of St. Paul, and it is probable that he held the first Christian service of any kind here. On December 24th, 1845, he held a Christmas service in St. Paul.

It is also probable that the service which he held at the Falls of St. Anthony on February 5th, 1848, was the first religious service in that place, or in the present city of Minneapolis, excepting the mission work of the brothers Samuel W. and Gideon H. Pond for the Sioux at their cabin built in 1834 near the east shore of Lake Calhoun.

Father Gear was still pleading in communications to the Board of Missions, and in articles to the Church newspapers, for the great need of missionary work to be done in Minnesota. We can imagine that his lameness made him anxious for reinforcements. At last, in 1850, Breck and his associates came. Father Gear's character is shown in the cordiality with which he met them, and in his eager co-operation, transferring his work in St. Paul, and giving an acre of ground to be added to their tract for the mission here. He was a frequent visitor at the Mission House, and he laid the corner stone of the original Christ Church. He was president of the first Standing Committee appointed by Bishop Kemper at the first Convocation, held November 4th, 1854, and was chairman of the committee appointed to draft a constitution and canons in 1856. He was a delegate to the General Convention in 1859, and was an active member of the Council which elected Bishop Whipple.

After the abandonment of Fort Snelling, in 1858, he continued to officiate for the families remaining there and at Mendota, until his appointment as chaplain at Fort Ripley, in the spring of 1860. In 1867 he was retired from the service, and soon afterward removed to Minneapolis, where he continued to reside until his death, which took place October

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13th, 1873. At the time of his death he had passed the age of fourscore, was the senior presbyter 696 of the Church in the United States, and had resided in Minnesota thirty-four years.

Bishop Whipple said at his funeral: "This is no common grave. A great man in our Israel is fallen; a brave-hearted soldier, after the battle of fourscore years, has entered into his rest."

In loving memory of such a man, of one who had so much to do with the early religious history of Minnesota, I take pleasure, in behalf of the Episcopal Church in Minnesota, in presenting to the Historical Society this portrait of the Rev. Dr. Ezekiel Gilbert Gear.